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The effects of terror are temporary phenomena. Force produces neither real nor lasting effects. Rather, the only lasting impact is produced by contemplation and understanding from within, and precisely, therefore, it can act in clarity upon the inner life of others. This is the principle of cultural creativity that Confucius accepted from the Book of Changes; a principle that will assuredly assert itself in the course of history in spite of momentary counter-currents.

Richard Wilhem, *Understanding the I Ching*¹

How to live in postapartheid South Africa: Reading Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*
Irene Visser

Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*² has attracted considerable attention in the short history of its existence. It has won literary awards, was made into a play, is currently performed as a jazz opera in Cape Town (under the title 'Love and Green Onions') and will appear on film soon. While it has received critical attention as an outstanding novel, it has also been called a flawed work because it privileges experience and emotionality over political analysis³. In many respects, then, this is an intriguing work. This article suggests that *Ways of Dying* presents an answer to the call for a new fiction for postapartheid South Africa, expressed since the mid-1980s by various theorists. It explores the novel's dramatisation of its central question of 'how to live', a question that eventually finds an answer in its final chapter. This final vision, I would argue, invites a particular openness from its readers, a receptiveness to the novel's interweaving of spirituality and art, a combination that is a traditional part of African culture.

In 1989 Jane Watts⁴ called on readers and critics to develop a new critical framework that would acknowledge the African writer's rejection of western literary traditions and seek to understand the development of a new discourse of liberation. In that same year, South African writer Albie Sachs also demanded a new discourse of liberation, humourously suggesting in a paper at the ANC seminar in Lesotho that members of the movement should be 'banned' from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle.⁵ As early as the mid-eighties, Njabulo S Ndebele, too, had spoken out against a continuation of the old ways of writing, calling for a literature that would free the social imagination in South Africa from the laws of perception of apartheid

society, stating that 'there must be a change of discourse, from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration'.⁶ In dramatising its protagonists' processes of exploration, *Ways of Dying* answers this call. In this respect, it is similar to other postapartheid fiction. It is, however, also different from other novels of this period.

Freedom and futurity in postapartheid fiction

In their introduction to *South African Fiction After Apartheid*, Attwell and Harlow remark that now, after apartheid, writers have a greater freedom of individual expression, and no longer need to address the major historical issues of the time. A second difference they note is a new orientation towards the past among postapartheid writers. Under apartheid, they note, writers were motivated by a great anxiety about the future, whereas postapartheid writers tend to look to the past; thus, in postapartheid literature 'the future has little future, whereas the future of the past is reasonably secure'.⁷ In privileging the personal over the political, Mda's novel is clearly an expression of the new freedom that Attwell and Harlow speak of. However, in its orientation towards the future, *Ways of Dying* is notably different from other important postapartheid fiction of the 1990s, such as, for instance, works by Mongane Wally Serote, Sindiwe Magona and Lauretta Ngcobo. While these deal with the complex situation of the nation before 1990, indeed engaging with the 'future of the past', *Ways of Dying* is set in the transition period of the early 1990s, documenting the present and its future from the perspective of the contemporary historical moment of the early 1990s.

While the novel's historical period is without a doubt the early postapartheid era, its setting is left deliberately vague. The time is an unspecified year between 1989 and 1994; the place is an unspecified metropolis; and even names of famous leaders (such as Nelson Mandela) are left unspecified. This deliberate withholding of specific historic details, no longer necessitated by state censorship, may be interpreted as a new emphasis on the autonomy of art. For not only does the novel's focus on the experiential and the personal constitute a release from the former political demands of resistance literature, but in its eventual orientation towards the future of postapartheid South Africa, it also invites an engagement with wider issues than the historical, local or personal. Farred⁸ cautiously speaks of the novel's 'spiritual experiment'. It is indeed

this aspect that, in my view, is an important part of the novel's answer to the call for a new postapartheid fiction.

Mourning the nation

This is not to say that *Ways of Dying* presents an easy 'spiritualisation' of the hardships of existence. The novel's communal narrative voice poignantly exposes the atrocities of the transition era, of 'the raging war that consumes our lives,' stressing the abnormality of the situation:

Normal deaths, those deaths that we have become accustomed to, deaths that happen everyday, are deaths of the gun, and the knife, and torture and gore. We don't normally see people who die of illness or of old age.⁹

Toloki and Noria, the book's protagonists, are familiar with loss, death and destitution. At the start of the narrative, their lives are stagnant; frozen in time, unconnected to a future and cut off from the past. This transition period is, for them, a time of mourning and abstinence. Noria has lost her sexual feelings after the death of her first son (or, rather, the first death of her son); likewise, Toloki is celibate, desiring for himself the purity of an Eastern monk. The precariousness of their existence is evident: Noria lives in the illegal settlement, in a shack which may be burned or bulldozed down overnight. Toloki sleeps in a waiting room, with his few possessions in a shopping cart. This waiting room is the perfect metaphor for the story's opening situation; here people are waiting for change to happen; for their lives to take on new meaning, for a new way to live.

Ndebele, in his 1994 collection of essays subtitled *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, states that South African fiction is politically most potent when it seeks in the details of ordinary life new possibilities of understanding and action.¹⁰ *Ways of Dying* is particularly effective in this manner, dramatising its protagonists' search for meaning and action through the mundane actions of their everyday lives, and unostentatiously expressing their search for meaning in the simple question of 'how to live'. To understand this question, we, as readers, must attune ourselves to the idioms of the book, which are akin to what Graham Pechey has defined as the idioms of wisdom: 'myth, proverb and prophesy, modes that do not obey the law of identity and

non-contradiction'.¹¹ For indeed, the novel's quest for knowledge, expressed in the central question of how to live, is a 'quest for wisdom'.

How to live

Toloki's decision to devote his life to mourning the nation at first seemingly provides the answer to the question of how to live, but as the novel unfolds, it turns out to be an inadequate answer. Gradually, various answers to the central questions are examined, and replaced by new answers, until the book discloses, in the final scenes, how the future may be welcomed. In this, Mda gives shape to what Ndebele outlined as the task for the new literature for South Africa; to explore how and why people can survive under these extreme conditions and to understand their mechanisms of survival and resistance.¹² Indeed, conditions are particularly harsh in *Ways of Dying*. People have no material security, nor personal safety. Life is highly precarious, with the constant risk of physical harm, or death, at the hands of the police, the vigilantes, the tribal chief and his warrior hostel dwellers, but also serial killers, or even misguided children with petrol bombs.

In his classic text *the Wisdom of Insecurity*¹³, philosopher Alan Watts states that it is human nature to make the insecurity of existence bearable by faith in the inalterable; in that which is beyond the reach of disasters. After the decline of the faith in God and the eternal laws ruling the universe, new myths of the twentieth century have taken its place, such as the myth of science (the belief that science will make life comfortable, productive and safe); the myth of political utopias (as in socialism) and the myth of economical laws.¹⁴

Given the extremely insecure world of Mda's novel, we may assume that the need for faith in the inalterable must be particularly strong, and that this need must in fact underlie its central question of 'how to live'. For people turn towards myths for direction and purpose, seeking a hold on life, and hope for a better future. Mda's novel acknowledges the myths of the twentieth century, but it also rejects them, implying that in this new postapartheid era a new belief must replace the deficient myths of the dominant culture. Yet Mda does not entirely discard them, but rather integrates, and, in doing so, transcends these myths, thus enabling a reconciliation between the old and the new that constitutes its eventual answer to the central question of 'how to live'.

Myths of our time

Let us examine the novel's view of the myths of our time: the myths of religion and patriarchy; of political utopia; and of economical laws.

Firstly, the myth of religion, whether of traditional African religion or of Christian religion, is no longer adhered to in Mda's novel, not even by the bereaved at the many funerals that we encounter in the book. The function of the Nurse at the graveside appears to be to testify to the ills of society, not to the eternal peace of the afterlife. The novel's spiritual quest, then, is not a quest for the divinity of traditional African or Christian religions. The traditional beliefs in the spirits of the ancestors, religious rituals and evil spells all belong to the characters' past, inextricably linked with the patriarchal structures of rural society. Noria and Toloki have abjured this past, and its patriarchal system which allows men to be domineering, self-centred and cruel. Toloki's father Jwara hates his own son for his ugly looks, humiliating him at every occasion; Noria's wealthy father Xesibe starves his daughter and grandson and drives them from his doorstep; Noria's husband Napu, by far the worst of fathers, employs his small son as a beggar, starving him and habitually chaining him to a post, until, on one of his drinking bouts, he simply forgets the child, who is eaten by dogs. The fathers in this novel, then, are particularly tyrannical, making the critique of traditional African patriarchy the sharpest criticism in the book.

In the new dispensation women have gained new positions of power. Toloki, once freed from the traditions of his village, observes how ineffectual the men are in the decision-making process in the settlement:

With great authority in their voices, [the men] come up with wise theories on how to put the world right. Then at night they demand to be given food, as if the food just walked into the house on its own.¹⁵

Secondly, the novel also rejects the myth of political utopia, so long dominant in the marxist-socialist ideology of the resistance movement. While this myth was vibrantly alive in the 1980s, as demonstrated in Serotes' *Gods of Our Time*, where political activists triumphantly proclaim themselves the gods of their time, the story of Noria is a vehement denial of its claims to a utopian future. After the gruesome death of her son Vutha, who was sentenced to 'the necklace' (the burning rubber tyre) by the Young Tigers, Noria seeks redress from the political leadership, but is, instead,

silenced. Her anger at this repression can find no outlet. Instead, she is forced to swear allegiance to the struggle, while, for good measure, her shack is burnt down in the night. This episode evidences that the question of 'how to live' cannot be answered through the myth of marxist socialism, whose representatives allow and condone radical violence directed at its own members--even a five-year-old child. Moreover, Noria is keenly aware that the party keeps women from higher positions of power:

All over the country, in what politicians call grassroots communities, women take the lead. But very few women reach executive level. Or even the regional or branch committee levels. I don't know why it is like this, Toloki.¹⁶

Thus, the novel suggests that the political movement allows for the continuing influence of the stranglehold of African patriarchy on women.¹⁷

Thirdly, the novel rejects the myth of science and its concomitant beliefs in economical laws, materialism and individualism. The scientific world view is particularly unilluminating in the settlement, its message being that verifiable, material life is all there is; that life is vulnerable; that the world will come to an end, and so forth. And while this myth offers ways of avoiding the hopelessness and emptiness of existence (through work, get money, security, happiness, health, and long life), these are hardly viable options to the urban underclass of Mda's novel. This widespread twentieth-century myth of materialism and individualism, so brilliantly exposed in American fiction by Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, is as effectively repudiated in *Ways of Dying*. Both Noria and Toloki have known times of material success (working as a prostitute and a boerewors salesman respectively) and could take up these lucrative occupations again, but both of them reject this option. Individual material well-being is not the answer to the question of how to live. This is borne out most expressively by the example of Nefolovhodwe, the embodiment of the 'rags to riches' materialistic dream, who has acquired enormous wealth as a coffin manufacturer. Grown rich on the many 'ways of dying' of his nation, and imitating the lifestyle of white millionaires (driving an imported white Cadillac, for instance) but most of all, in denying the humanity of his homeboy Toloki, Nefolovhodwe is what Frantz Fanon has termed the 'lactified' African, whose materialistic achievement is presented as a ludicrous mimicry of the white oppressor. The book's humour is evident from Nefolovhodwe's favourite pastime: training fleas for his circus.

To the myths described by Watts may be added what Nadine Gordimer has termed the escapist myth of twentieth-century popular culture, the 'myth of Batman and his kind'. This myth provides fantasy escape routes for those who feel overwhelmed by the pressures of existence, and are unable to confront even 'the hazard of answers to the terrors of their existence'. According to Gordimer, the writer counters this escapism, engaging with the forces of being, as myth in its ancient form attempted to do.¹⁸ In *Ways of Dying* this escapist route is briefly explored by Noria and Toloki, who find a momentary romantic escape from the pressures of existence in their wallpaper garden, but this, too, proves to be an inadequate answer to the question of how to live.

The book's rejection of the myths of religion, patriarchy, and socialist utopia may not require an adjustment of our habitual way of reading. However, in the context of the protagonists' overwhelming poverty, the book's rejection of the myth of economical laws may pose a serious challenge, requiring, perhaps, a 'willing suspension of disbelief' from its readers.¹⁹ Yet, it is precisely this readerly open-mindedness, I believe, that is required for a full understanding and appreciation of the novel's final chapters. For here, the novel presents its answer to the question of how to live, in a vision which reconciles enmity and heals psychic wounds, thus liberating the protagonists from the past and opening up a new future. This vision integrates the myths of the twentieth century with traditional African rituals and personal experiences. Thus, it gives shape to a new mode of writing in South African fiction, moving away from the time in which writers were constrained by the chains of apartheid and the ideologies of resistance. Chicana writer and theorist Ana Castillo has pointed out the constriction of this marxist-oriented ideology, which addresses the suppression and exploitation of the underclass, but does not acknowledge spirituality. Yet non-Western literatures, she claims, cannot be understood without respect for their traditions, in which spirituality is closely interwoven with history, identity and community.²⁰ This respect, I would claim, must be foremost in our readerly attention to the text, in answer to the new way of reading that the novel invites.

Spirituality and cultural creativity

In the final chapter of *Ways of Dying*, history, identity and community are subtly interwoven with spirituality. History, the past that Toloki has wanted to banish

from his life, first presents itself and demands to be negotiated. As Attwell and Harlow have noted, this is true for the overall situation in postapartheid South Africa:

The pressure is on to find the resources, policies, and vision to 'bind the nation together' and to take its people decisively from a traumatized past to a reconstructed future. But, as hard as one might strive for healing and reconstruction, the past stubbornly manifests itself.²¹

In *Ways of Dying*, the past manifests itself in the shape of Nefolovhodwe's 'stubbornly' recurring dream in which Jwara, Toloki's deceased father, orders Nefolovhodwe to bring his art works to Toloki. When this has been done, the spectre of the past (with the repression of patriarchy and traditional religion) is laid to rest, and Jwara's spirit, reconciled with his son, can join the ancestors. In accepting the past, Toloki can finally integrate it in his present and is thus enabled envisage the future. This process is explained in the ancient teachings of the Chinese *Book of Changes* as follows:

No matter how painful, we must prepare to move forward into the new time, together with old remnants that tradition has given us. Once this decision is reached, then the new time will take shape. New times must remain in contact with old times. Humanity must not experience a break. Otherwise history would be meaningless.²²

And so, when Toloki learns to forgive, his past identity is no longer denied or resented, but fully integrated in the present. Through Toloki's reconciliation with both his father and his substitute father, Nefolovhodwe, Jwara's figurines themselves take on new meaning, no longer signifying the hurt and deprivation of the past, but pleasure and beauty, as well as the promise of financial support for the settlement community. Thus, the myth of economical laws, too, is integrated in this final scene of pleasure and celebration, becoming part of the novel's vision of cooperation and shared incentives, where material gain benefits the entire community.

New ways of reading

The novel's interweaving of spirituality and art demands particular attention of its readers. It invites our willingness to acknowledge this interrelationship, which is a traditional element of African culture. This openness to the specifically African modes of expression is, at present, widely called for. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, for instance, in her review of recent studies of orality and literacy in African literature, states that the future direction in the study of African literature is to be 'without undue validation of African literary creativity with reference to any other tradition than its own'.²³

In its final chapter *Ways of Dying* invites our readerly receptiveness to the mysterious spiritual forces inherent in art. The figurines are strangely potent; they appear from the dust and debris quite clean and glittering; they cannot be stolen, and, containing Noria's spirit, they inspire pleasure and goodwill in their beholders. They appear at the threshold of a new year; a new time for the nation, and a new life for Noria and Toloki and their settlement community. The spiritual magic of Noria's song, the mysterious strength of the figurines and the pleasure-bringing power of Toloki's drawings are all part of the novel's answer to the question of how to live. In this vision of a hopeful future, a vision fully incorporating the cultural practice of African visual art and oral culture, the novel answers Ndebele's call for what he terms 'the restorative approach' in South African literature, in which the writer reveals and restores to the oppressed the history of their cultural practice.²⁴ Significantly, Toloki and Noria's relationship is explicitly called a 'creative partnership', and it is this new relationship between a man and a woman that the novel foregrounds in its final chapter, as a synthesis, perhaps, to the thesis of patriarchy and its antithesis, feminism.

This 'creative partnership' may be placed in the wider context of African art and its relation with spirituality. In an article on African art²⁵, McNaughton and Pelrine state that throughout Africa, spirituality often involves the use of artworks for the activation of energies and spiritual forces. These forces are behind all activities, and in fact constitute organic life. Art works therefore are powerful objects, with curative or protective powers. Moreover, they play an important part in initiations, the ceremonies that mark a change in status or role, giving symbolic meaning not only to initiations of dignitaries, but also to initiations of ordinary men and women who choose to join voluntary associations, 'organizations found throughout Africa that are dedicated to particular causes or ideals'.²⁶

These functions of art--spiritual and initiatory--are at the heart of the final chapter of *Ways of Dying*. When Toloki takes up drawing again, it is first merely to amuse the children and Noria, but finally, inspired by Noria's mysteriously powerful singing, he draws human figures. This new mode of expression symbolises his returning interest in human companionship—which is a return to life.

In these important new 'ways of living', then, Mda gives shape to a new postapartheid novel in South Africa, inviting his readers to a new way of reading based on a receptiveness to the experience of the interrelations between African spirituality, art and social engagement. In its final pages, the novel points towards a hopeful future, with the children of the settlement fully present amidst the New Year celebration, learning new beliefs to supplant the extremism of their political education; a commitment not to 'fight until the end' but to live, to work together, and to achieve pleasure.

NOTES

¹ Hellmut Wilhelm and Richard Wilhelm, *Understanding the I Ching: The Wilhelm Lectures on the Book of Changes*. Trans. Cary F. Baynes and Irene Eber. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995)p.168

² Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (Oxford UP, Cape Town, 1997)

³ See Grant Farred, 'Mourning the Apartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*', in *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol 46.No 1, (2000) pp.183-206.

⁴ Jane Watts, *Black Writers in South Africa* (Macmillan,London, 1989)

⁵ Quoted in Daivd Attwell and Barbara Harlow, 'Introduction: South African Fiction After Apartheid', in *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol.46 No.1 (2000)p.1

⁶ Njabulo S. Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1994)p.73

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- ⁷ Attwell and Harlow, *op.cit.*, p.4
- ⁸ Farred, *op.cit.*,p.195
- ⁹ Mda, *op.cit.*,p.157
- ¹⁰ Ndebele, *op.cit.*,p.169
- ¹¹ Graham Pechey, 'Introduction', in Njabulo S. Ndebele, *op.cit.*, pp.2-6
- ¹² Ndebele, *op.cit.*,p.160
- ¹³ Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, (Pantheon Books, New York, 1951)
- ¹⁴ The word 'myth' is not used here as meaning 'untrue' or 'unhistorical'. A myth, as Watts defines it, is a complex of stories which human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life.
- ¹⁵ Mda, *op.cit.*,p.175
- ¹⁶ *ibid* p.165
- ¹⁷ For an interesting discussion of this aspect, see Farred, *op.cit.*, p.197.
- ¹⁸ Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York, 1999)pp.197-8
- ¹⁹ From a materialistic perspective, Mda's adumbration of an optimistic future in the last chapter of the novel may well be rejected. See, for instance, Farred's criticism of the book's ultimate optimism. The 'commensurability between the achievement of the postapartheid state and the upliftment of the black underclass' is fallacious, he states 'as the end of apartheid has certainly not meant economical equality in South African society.' *Op.cit.*,p. 187.
- ²⁰ Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (Penguin Books, New York, 1995)p.91
- ²¹ Attwell and Harlow, *op.cit.*,p. 2
- ²² Hellmut Wilhelm and Richard Wilhelm, *op.cit.*,pp. 262-3
- ²³ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo Book review of *African Women's Literature: Orature and Intertextuality*, by Susan Arndt, in *Research in African Literatures* Vol.33,no.1 (2002)pp.187-189.
- ²⁴ Ndebele, *op.cit.*,p.119
- ²⁵ Patrick R. McNaughton and Diane Pelrine, 'African Art', in *Africa* (eds.) Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995)pp. 223-256

²⁶ *ibid*,p.253